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ABSTRACT

Described are the development, administrative problems, and improvements in a special half day program for gifted students from 19 schools in Chicago. Noted is the use of consultants as teaching staff, problems such as lack of funds for transporting pupils and funding cutbacks, and changes in student selection procedures. (DB)

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SUBMITTED BY

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THE DEVELOPMENT, MAINTENANCE AND IMPROVEMENT OF A GIFTED CENTER FOR ELEMENTARY STUDENTS IN AN URBAN AREA

The idea for our district center at Ray School was conceived early in 1970, and it was opened to students in the fall of that year. It was linked to a federally funded learning center at the school, which was scheduled to receive funds only until June, 1971. The development of the gifted program was intended to help keep the parent program alive. This was mainly a political strategy. Since funding for the federal project would automatically expire the following year, we had to design the center to show that it could expand, or we would not be refunded by the local Chicago Board of Education. The plan for the gifted program was to have included in our selection all of the schools in our district. Since our parent program served students only from our immediate area, highly placed officials told us repeatedly that refunding of the project by the city was not at all likely because we were only one school.

When our proposal for a gifted students' Center was being considered there were substantial funds for such program in Chicago. This was before two major cutbacks and before the proliferation of almost 400 gifted programs now in operation.

After the proposal was funded as part of the learning center, we worked with gifted students for the required 150 minutes, five mornings per week, with different children coming each morning.

Thus the grafting of the State of Illinois Gifted Program on to a short term federal project paid off for us, since the local system did not phase out a successful and expanded set of programs. In short, our parent program was refunded in 1971 and we eventually became known as the District #14 Learning and Gifted Center.

Five students were selected from each of the thirteen sending schools and each student was programmed for several subjects built around the strength of the existing teaching staff. The program began as an academic center with social studies, process oriented science, Fortran Compute programming, and algebra and geometry as course offerings. Students were selected on the basis of I.Q. scores, achievement scores and teacher recommendations.

Our music program was funded in 1971 and other special programs followed over a period of years with transfers in and out, of the regular teaching staff, the program began to rely on the use of outside paid consultants. We evolved from an academic center to a student interest center. During this shift we then included the Renzulli rating scale in our identification procedures. An attempt was made to include students whose profile would show motivational, creative and leadership characteristics. Students selected a set of subjects based on their interests, after they were sent to the center. We helped them develop and sustain their interests by using volunteers and paid consultants. Once a regular and stable cadre of consultants was established, we again shifted to a more

structured creative and useful arts program which we now have. This includes photography, art and sculpture, choral music, creative writing, journalism and urban studies. The students now are selected for particular programs prior to their entry by the home school in every program except music. For this students are personally auditioned and selected by Janet Underhill our music consultant.

Some important aspects of the development phase were:

1. The State of Illinois Gifted Program had a lot to offer.
2. Channels of communication between our program and top officials were open and effective.
3. Surrounding public schools were willing to release their gifted students and send them to us.
4. Though teachers came and went, our consultants remained with us and worked for not large sums of money.
5. We had prior success with innovative educational programs.
6. Local administrators gave us the minimal support necessary to start the program.

It has been a long and difficult climb from our opening day when we began with 65 students from 13 schools, to the present. We now have 105 students from 19 schools. Last year was our peak year with 150 students, but due to the cutbacks in education by the governor of Illinois this year, we are now serving fewer students.

Program Maintenance

Having reliable and skilled adults was a key factor in maintaining this type of program. Programs offerings which worked well and were liked by the students lead to our current status.

One of the key elements in maintenance has been the aggressive and continuous requesting of help from the school system. Constant requests for the use of paid consultants was important, along with learning what else was available to us. Having open lines of communication with administrators at the top was vital. In my experience no department at our board does better in encouraging direct communication between themselves and local program managers than our gifted department.

Money for materials gave us a certain latitude not open to regular classrooms. Being allowed to order materials for immediate consumption and ordering without using a board approved list, often helped us to "capture the moment", while working with interested and curious students.

There have been three types of maintenance problems.

1. The problem of no funds for transporting pupils.
    a. This has had a negative effect on our program especially in the winter when our attendance dropped, especially with students who came from a distance.

       Not having money for transportation but having free tickets to special cultural performances also had a negative effect.

We were always able to obtain costly tickets in large quantities for free, and if the tickets went unused because the children did not show, the money was wasted. There was not one bit of flexibility in transferring funds. Another example of this problem was demonstrated when we were able to hire an expensive guidance expert to conduct an upward bound program for our students, which took place at schools and universities all over the Chicago area, without having one penny for transportation even for our poorer students. Many of these students were already strapped by having to pay carfare to come and go to and from our center.

The second type of problem was weathering the storm of educational cutbacks and filling the places of superior teachers who were shifted to other positions elsewhere. This year I have had to fill in wherever possible. Becoming the principal teacher and sharing the load with almost each consultant has been difficult, but rewarding.

The third type of problem had to do with the transferring of the fiscal officers in charge of the gifted program, or in some cases with the very nature of the rules we operate under.

Guidelines and rules of the program were often interpreted with a marked difference by each new person in the position.
I will give three examples of the type of problem

a. Our consultants could have been paid more of what they were worth but one bureaucrat said this would require a special report to the board of education, and he would

not do this.

I never did find out why!

b. Our consultants could not get paid for planning meetings because a very high official had to sign their vouchers, and a bureaucrat again did not want to initiate the necessary papers for this. It was easier for him to tell me to plan with teachers for which no other signature was required in the payroll vouchers but his. Thus funds were available only for the teaching staff who at times, were either remotely involved with the gifted students or who were not always effective, but no money could go to the people who helped operate a quality program.

c. Under state rules we can order expensive film in large quantities because film is classified as materials but we cannot order even one camera because cameras are equipment and equipment purchases are not available.

Thus maintaining the program has been an uphill fight all of the way. This year the program has improved to the point where the students managed to come even during severe weather. This is a sign that they do not want to miss out and it leads me to the third major aspect of this paper which is....

Program Improvement

During this past year we have again changed our identification and our selection procedures. We used check lists for each course offering, showing the sending schools what type of students would best be served by our program. We eliminated the rating scale and we asked for students who were the most talented in a particular area, such as art, photography or writing. We also stopped selecting larger

numbers of students from one school to come to us on a particular morning and then sent to a given course. Instead of this we asked each school to consider sending us only one or two candidates for each subject, and we would then select from a composite list the most qualified students. This helped to improve the program considerably at the expense of convenience. It meant that those parents, principals and community representatives who had volunteered to transport some students could not do it all on one day because now they would be called upon to transport children on different days for different subjects. After this change our students now had the ability as well as the interest in a given area. The results we are having this year from each group are clearly improvements over our performance in past years. This, coupled with the steady growth and commitment of our consulting staff and the elimination of unqualified professional staff has brought us to our present situation. This has happened in spite of sixty percent cutback this year in consultant stipends and in spite of the loss of some excellent teachers.

When working with talent students there is a distinct advantage in employing persons who not only care for the students but who have superior skills as well. We have these types of people in our program.

We have also improved our program by attending conferences on the gifted, reading the literature, visiting other programs, attending summer institutes, having brunches for our students and their families, going to cultural performances, running contest, and participating

in zoo and museum programs for gifted students.

Before concluding, I would like to briefly discuss the type of setting needed to encourage creativity in gifted students. This is the setting we are continually striving for at our center. I will quote the noted Israeli educator, Erika Landau, who says, "In order to be creative, a student needs an encouraging atmosphere. The more creative a person is the more ready to absorb, the more he will make use of his gifts - the less encouragement he will need from his environment. But even the most creative person needs some kind of encouragement. The most important conditions for intensifying creativity are:

freedom - so he can feel that he is accepted the way he is and not the way he ought to be.

security - so that he should dare to activate his gifts in response to new situations.

Creativity will bear fruit only in suitable and encouraging environmental conditions. Thus it is obvious that a permissive environment, which does not react, will not be ideal for the encouragement of creativity, and only a responsive environment will inspire the child to be creative." We think that we have created such a responsive environment for our students.

In conclusion I would like to say that we are constantly striving to help our young students expand their talents. Since the spirit of our program centers on youth, I will end by reading a student's poem from the writings of Hughes Mearns.

The poem is entitled:

YOUTH

"I must laugh and dance and sing,
Youth is such a lovely thing.

Soon I shall be old and stately;
I shall promenade sedately

Down a narrow pavement street,
And the people that I meet

Will be stiff and narrow too,
Careful what they say and do;

It will be quite plain to see
They were never young like me.

When I walk where flowers grow
I shall have to stoop down low

If I want one for a prize;
Now I'm just the proper size.

Let me laugh and dance and sing
Youth is such - a lovely thing."